

INVITATION TO WASHINGTON, D. C.



Peskelechaco, of the Republican Pawnees
Portrait by Charles Bird King

DANISH NATIONAL MUSEUM



INVITATION TO WASHINGTON —A BID FOR PEACE

*And, as part of the artful maneuver, Charles Bird King
is commissioned to paint the guests' portraits*

by Herman J. Viola

EACH YEAR, as generations of curious Americans have done before them, thousands of visitors file through the rooms and hallways of the White House. Few leave without a renewed feeling for the dignity of America's cultural heritage—a feeling enhanced by five striking Indian portraits that hang in the ground-floor library. Ironically, one hundred and fifty years ago these Indians were also White House visitors, gaping in wonderment and fascination at all they saw. They were no ordinary tourists. As representatives of remote and militant Indian tribes, they were there as objects of an elaborate scheme designed to influence them to accept peaceably American expansion into their country.

Too weak to risk war with the powerful tribes arrayed along its western borders, the federal government until well into the nineteenth century stressed diplomacy rather than force in its Indian policy. Inviting Indian leaders to visit America's most important cities, especially Washington, D.C., was a major component of this policy. After inspecting forts, arsenals, and battleships, being showered with presents, and meeting their Great Father the president, few of the impressionable natives returned to their people without profound

respect for the wealth and strength of the United States. The Indians whose portraits now hang in the White House library were no exceptions when, in the fall of 1821, they were brought to Washington by their agent Benjamin O'Fallon.

Two years earlier, O'Fallon had been given the task of preparing the Indians of the Upper Missouri region for the arrival of the Americans. Fearful of England's intentions in the Northwest following the War of 1812, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun had conceived a master plan intended to overawe the tribes and cut off their intercourse with British traders operating from Canada. A military post was to be established on the Missouri River at its confluence with the Yellowstone, and another at the mouth of the Minnesota on the Mississippi, thereby securing the vast area of the two river valleys for American interests. As Calhoun explained in the letter appointing O'Fallon agent, "The important military movements which are contemplated on the Missouri will be greatly facilitated or impeded by the friendship or hostilities of the Indians. Their disposition will be principally influenced by the conduct of the agent, and you will accordingly spare no pains to acquire their friendship and confidence."

Choncape, or Big Kansas, of the Oto tribe was among the Indians who visited the capital and posed for portraits by Charles Bird King.



Many believe this painting by King—the only Indian group he depicted—to be his finest work. From left to right are Young Omawhaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri, and two Pawnees.

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Calhoun assured O'Fallon that "these important objects" could be accomplished by a proper combination of kindness, firmness, and "a judicious distribution of presents." The devastating depression of 1819 and a cost-conscious Congress shattered Calhoun's plans for western expansion, leaving Fort Atkinson and the Upper Missouri Indian Agency, established at Council Bluffs, the exposed vanguards of the United States.

O'FALLON HAD BEEN a good choice for the difficult post. Although only twenty-six, he had already seen many years' service as a fur trader and Indian agent, working for

his uncle William Clark, the superintendent of Indian affairs at St. Louis, who had raised him from infancy. Because of his long association with Clark, O'Fallon was remarkably well-schooled in the customs, habits, and character of the Indians of the Upper Missouri.

Young O'Fallon was responsible for a vaguely defined region occupied by roving bands of some fourteen tribes, including the Assiniboin, Blackfeet, Crow, Kansa, Missouri, Omaha, Oto, Pawnee, Ponca, and Sioux. The obvious inadequacy of the American military presence along the Missouri River, however, had emboldened the Indians and weakened the chance of attaching them to the United States. Furthermore, American traders and trappers were swarming into the

region, arousing fear and anger among the tribes. O'Fallon was sitting on a powder keg.

Hoping to forestall hostilities, he requested permission to bring to Washington a delegation of about fifteen chiefs and warriors from the more militant tribes. "I think it of the highest importance," he wrote, "that a few of those [Indians] should visit the President together with some of the most populous States and Citys to enable them to see the wealth and Population which they cannot be induced to believe is equal to what they have seen in Canada." The troops at Fort Atkinson had inspired respect "and our boats additional astonishment," but the Indians were "still disposed to underrate our strength, to believe the detachment of troops on the Missouri is not a part, but the whole of our Army." Calhoun liked the suggestion but asked him to delay another year before bringing the delegation.

But O'Fallon could not wait. Shortly after making his request in April 1821, he learned that a Pawnee war party had attacked nine Americans near the Arkansas River, killing several. The raiders had escaped with about a thousand dollars worth of plunder—trade goods, guns, and ammunition—and two American flags, which they had flagrantly displayed at their village. O'Fallon suggested sending a four-hundred-man military expedition after the culprits. Calhoun agreed that such temerity could not be ignored but thought it more prudent and economical to invite tribal leaders to Washington, where they could be cautioned about their reckless behavior.

Anticipating a lively winter in the East after two years at his wilderness outpost, the handsome bachelor acted quickly. He sent runners to the tribes near Council Bluffs, inviting the chiefs and warriors to visit their Great Father in Washington; in less than a month he was traveling east, accompanied by his black body servant, two interpreters, and seventeen Kansa, Missouri, Omaha, Oto, and Pawnee Indians.

The proud, warlike Pawnee, led by Sharitarish, brother of head chief Tarecawawaho, dominated the delegation. Confident in the belief that the president of the United States could not have as many wives and warriors as he had, Tarecawawaho refused to humble himself by visiting the Great Father; but he had no objection to sending thirty-year-old Sharitarish as his representative. Accompanying him were Peskelechaco, of the Republican Pawnee, and Petalesharro, chief of the Pawnee Loups. Tall, handsome, only twenty-four, his bravery attested to by his full war bonnet of eagle feathers, Petalesharro four years earlier had saved a captive Comanche woman from being burned at the stake. Opposed to human sacrifice, he had rushed from the crowd, cut the woman free, thrown her across a horse, and carried her from the Pawnee village.

Less militant though no less colorful were the other delegates. Leading the Omaha deputation was Ongpatonga or Big Elk, their principal chief. This distinguished orator was about forty and considered the most talented and influential member of his tribe. Ably representing the Oto were Choncape, or

Big Kansas, and Shaumonekusse, who was accompanied by his young wife Eagle of Delight. The principal Kansa delegate was Monchonsia, or White Plume.

Supervising this diverse and temperamental group challenged O'Fallon's abilities. The Missouri, Omaha, and Oto were peaceful and amicable, "deserving the friendship and confidence of the American people," but the agent considered the Kansa "impudent" and the Pawnee "insolent." The troublesome Kansa were at war with most of their neighbors, creating additional tensions within the delegation. Communication was also a major problem. The delegates represented two language groups, and none of them spoke English. Consequently interpreters had to translate all instructions and messages twice. No matter; O'Fallon considered himself capable of coping with any situation. Arrogant, quick-tempered, and fast with his fists, he scorned agents who handled their Indians in a "tame and humbled maner [*sic*]," believing they disgraced both "themselves and [the] government in the eye of the Savage." In his opinion, an Indian agent had to be a man "of the most daring, persevering, and enterprising character [*sic*]."

THE DELEGATION'S immediate destination was St. Louis. With the Indians quartered under his uncle's care at the superintendency, O'Fallon prepared for the rigorous nine hundred miles ahead. He reshod the horses and mules, and purchased draft horses, a harness, two dearborn wagons, and such incidentals as nine pounds of tobacco, three pounds of vermilion, and six pairs of stirrups. He also added two men to the company: James Graves, a black hired on as cook for the Indians until they reached Washington; and Louis T. Honore, his uncle's interpreter and secretary whom Clark may have sent along to keep a protective eye on his hard-drinking, hot-tempered young nephew. Regardless, Honore served O'Fallon well, handling all business matters and attending to the delegates. While O'Fallon kept busy elsewhere, the Indians evidently amused themselves by eating, for they consumed some four hundred and fifty pounds of beef in twelve days.

On the morning of October 19, the colorful cavalcade resumed its trek. Riding in the lead was the confident O'Fallon, reins in one hand, his ever present cigar in the other. Strung out behind him in full regalia were the somber, apprehensive Indians. Lumbering along in the rear were the wagons, driven by the two blacks and piled high with provisions, bedding, and gifts for the president.

Sleeping at inns where possible, camping along the road, the Indians traveled for six weeks by way of Louisville, Wheeling, and Hagerstown. On November 30, the *Daily National Intelligencer* announced the delegation's triumphant arrival in Washington. "Their object is to visit their Great Father, and learn something of that civilization of which they have hitherto remained in total ignorance," the paper

reported. Representing the "most remote tribes with which we have intercourse," the delegates were thought to be "the first of those tribes that have ever been in the midst of our settlements."

Surprisingly, O'Fallon did not board with his charges in the capital. Perhaps he had seen enough of them during the preceding three months. The first four days he and his body servant stayed at the Indian Queen, Washington's most popular hotel, advertising sixty "well-proportioned and well-furnished" rooms; then he moved to an equally fine inn owned by Joshua Tennison on Pennsylvania Avenue. The Indians and interpreters, however, he lodged a block away at George Miller's tavern, a notorious establishment where slave dealers reputedly housed their property while traveling through Washington. Apparently Miller's price was right. He charged O'Fallon only seventy-five cents a day for each delegate's room and board, half the amount the agent paid at the Indian Queen and Tennison's. The travel-weary delegation rested a week, and then all but two Indians and an interpreter left for a tour of Baltimore, New York, and Philadelphia, returning to Washington two days after Christmas.

For the next few days, the bewildered visitors were set upon by tailors, cobblers; and merchants who measured them for hats, shirts, trousers, and boots. The men received military uniforms—blue greatcoats with red cuffs and capes and silver epaulettes, blue trousers, and black leather boots. The hats resembled a coronet decorated with red and blue foil and brightly colored feathers. Silver arm bands, tomahawks, sheath knives, and powder horns completed the ensembles. Eagle of Delight was given scarlet pantaloons and a green cambric cloak. The Indians were evidently pleased with the clothes because Shaumonekusse more than twenty years later was still proudly wearing his greatcoat, which, an observer noted, was "adorned with red facings and enormously large brass buttons, and garnished upon each shoulder with a pair of tarnished, sickly-looking silver epaulettes."

THE INDIANS wore their new finery when they formally met President James Monroe at the White House on February 4, 1822. Followed by O'Fallon and the interpreters, they were ushered into the president's antechamber (now the Red Room) where they nervously awaited his arrival. They were not completely at ease in their strange clothes. "Their coats seemed to pinch them about the shoulders," one bystander noticed; "now and then they would take off their uneasy headdresses, and one sought a temporary relief by pulling off his boots." Monroe's entrance brought the assembly to attention.

Speaking from prepared notes held in one hand, the president addressed the delegates, thanking them for coming such a great distance to see him and the wonders of the white man's world. Now, he hoped the Indians would want the comforts of civilized life for themselves. If so, he was pre-

pared to send missionaries to teach their people agriculture and Christianity. The president was also pleased that the Indians had visited forts, arsenals, and navy yards, but, he warned, they had seen only a fraction of American strength. Few fighting men were needed at the capital; in time of war all citizens took up arms and became warriors. Thus, he urged the Indians to remain at peace with each other and not to listen to those who advised them to mistrust or fight with the United States. As Monroe spoke, the interpreters translated his speech sentence by sentence; the Indians in return nodded gravely, indicating that they understood what had been said.

When the president finished, the delegates were invited to respond. Sharitarish stepped forward, solemnly shook hands with Monroe, and slowly delivered a long speech. "My Great Father," he said, "I have traveled a great distance to see you—I have seen you and my heart rejoices. I have heard your words . . . and I will carry them to my people as pure as they came from your month. . . . [I] have seen your people, your homes, your vessels on the big lake, and a great many wonderful things far beyond my comprehension, which appears to have been made by the Great Spirit and placed in your hands." But, wonderful as it was, he would not trade his way of life for that of the white man. There were still plenty of buffalo to hunt and beaver to trap. "It is too soon," Sharitarish continued, "to send those good men [the missionaries] among us—we are not starving yet—we wish you to permit us to enjoy the chase until the game of our country is exhausted—until the wild animals become extinct. . . . I have grown up, and lived this long without work," he declared; "I am in hopes you will suffer me to die without it. We have everything we want—we have plenty of land, if you will keep your people off it."

The other chiefs then spoke in turn, each stressing his love for the Indian way of life. The first speakers were noticeably nervous, but each succeeding orator became less reserved until the last—claimed a witness—spoke "as loud as you ever heard a lawyer at a county court bar."

As each speaker finished, he laid a present at the president's feet. By the end of the ceremony, Monroe was sitting behind a mound of buffalo robes, calumets, moccasins, and feathered headdresses. Sharitarish explained that the Indians knew the gifts would be of little value to him, but they wanted Monroe "to have them deposited and preserved in some conspicuous part of your lodge, so that when we are gone . . . if our children should visit this place, as we do now, they may see and recognize with pleasure the deposits of their fathers, and reflect on the times that are past." What became of the gifts is unknown; only the chiefs' portraits remain.

By the end of the lengthy ceremony, the audience had been swelled considerably by curious onlookers, including several Supreme Court justices who were waiting to see Monroe. Everyone adjourned to the drawing room (today's Blue Room) for cake and wine. The Indians capped the festivities by



Eagle of Delight, wife of Shaumonekusse. This and the following four paintings are on display in the White House.



Sharitarish, brother of head chief Tarecawawaho, represented the Pawnee people.



Petalesharro, chief of the Pawnee Loups and foe of the practice of human sacrifice.



Monchousia, or White Plume, the principal Kansa delegate.



SHAUMONEKUSSE — OTO HAIT CHIEF
PAINTED AT WASHINGTON, D.C.
BY CHARLES BIRD KING, CIRCA 1821.

Shaumonekusse, representative of the Oto people.



Agent O'Fallon housed the Indians and their interpreters in George Miller's tavern, at a cost of only seventy-five cents a day per person for room and board.

lighting their pipes and passing them to the president, Chief Justice John Marshall, and other dignitaries, who took token whiffs. By this time the visitors had endured long enough their unfamiliar and uncomfortable clothing. As a dismayed observer reported, "one of them, unable longer to bear the pressure of his boots, sat down and deliberately pulled them off. Another his coat, until the whole might have brought themselves back to a comfortable state of nature had they not been led out."

The Indians met the president on two other occasions. A month earlier, New Year's Day, 1822, they had been part of the crush at the annual White House reception. While the Marine Band played a medley of patriotic airs, cabinet officials, members of the diplomatic corps and Congress, and military officers chatted amiably with each other as they elbowed their way to the punch bowls. Shortly before the

afternoon reception was to end, the Indians stalked into the East Room and stole the show from the fashionably dressed ladies of Washington. The Indians were arrayed in their finest ceremonial garb; three were wrapped in brightly painted buffalo robes, including Petalesharro who was also wearing his war bonnet with feathers "descending like wings to the waist." Bright vermilion made their faces even more awesome. To Jonathan Elliot, editor of the *Washington Gazette*, they looked "cadaverous" until the "music and the hilarity of the scene" put them at ease; then "in place of pensive gravity, a heartfelt joy beamed in the sullen eye of the Indian warrior."

Their last meeting with President Monroe was on Saturday, February 9, when they danced for him on the enclosure just north of the White House. Well-publicized by the local press and favored with a crisp, sunny day, the spectacle attracted half the population of Washington, including many ladies



Big Elk, or Ongpatonga, considered the most talented and influential of the Omaha Indians.

and most of the congressmen who had adjourned early for the occasion. The mock council between the Indians and the presidential party which opened the show afforded "a striking specimen of native oratory," in one bystander's opinion. "The gestures of the Indian speakers were violent, but energetic, and frequently graceful." When the conference ended, the warriors threw aside their blankets and, armed with tomahawks and clubs, performed dances described as "a rude kind of leaping, governed, in some measure, by the sullen sound of a sort of drum." Wearing nothing but war paint and red flannel breechclouts, the Indians "uttered shocking yells, and writhed and twisted their bodies in frightful contortion." The three-hour theatrical was a tremendous success. "They were painted horribly, and exhibited the operation of scalping and tomahawking in fine style," a second observer claimed. Still another thought the exhibition one which "no person of liberal and philosophical curiosity would willingly have missed seeing, and which no one who viewed it . . . would choose to witness again."

The Indians so impressed Washingtonians with their dignified and orderly behavior that many of the delegates were invited to private homes for tea or to spend an evening by the fireside. Shaumonekuse and his wife were frequent guests of Jonathan Barber, a local physician. "She was a very good natured, mild woman," he wrote, whereas her husband "shewed great readiness in acquiring our language, retaining anything that he was once informed, and imitating the tones of every word." The Indians also demonstrated a natural wit. On one occasion the doctor showed several of them a skeleton he kept in a closet, whereupon one of them grasped a bony hand and said, "How do you do?"

The most popular delegate was Petalesharro, whose dramatic rescue of the captive woman fired the imaginations of romantic easterners. The girls of Miss White's Seminary immortalized the deed by having an elaborate silver medal engraved for him. The front shows Petalesharro and the woman rushing toward two horses; the reverse shows several disappointed Indians looking at the empty scaffold. The inscription reads: TO THE BRAVEST OF THE BRAVES. The girls presented the medal at a private home in a ceremony witnessed by the entire delegation. Touched by the gesture, Petalesharro clutched the medal and said: "I am glad that my brothers and sisters have heard of the good act that I have done. My brothers and sisters think that I did it in ignorance, but I now know what I have done."

Perhaps the best indication of the delegation's popularity was the requests from prominent artists for the Indians to sit for portraits. The celebrated John Neagle painted Shari-tarish, Choncape, and Petalesharro when the delegation visited Philadelphia. Samuel F. B. Morse, better known for his inventive genius, included Petalesharro's portrait in his monumental "The Old House of Representatives," which he painted in Washington in 1822. Since Morse hoped to stabilize his shaky financial resources by taking this painting on

tour and charging admission, he obviously tried to capitalize on Petalesharro's popularity by placing him in the House gallery watching the preparations for an evening session. Interestingly the solitary Indian, identified only as "Pawnee Chief" in Morse's key to the painting, closely resembles the portrait of Petalesharro by Charles Bird King.

King, a fine artist who included among his patrons such eminent statesmen as Calhoun, Monroe, John Quincy Adams, and Henry Clay, is probably best remembered for his many Indian portraits. His first were of the Indians with O'Fallon. King painted them at the urging of Thomas L. McKenney, superintendent of Indian trade, who wanted the portraits for the American Indian archives he had established in his Georgetown office. The Indians were so pleased with their likenesses that they asked for personal copies. Altogether, King received three hundred dollars from the federal government for twenty-five portraits of the O'Fallon delegation. Seventeen went with the Indians, eight went to McKenney's archives and were burned in the Smithsonian Institution fire of 1865. The artist, however, made a number of copies for his own use, including the portraits of Petalesharro, Shari-tarish, Eagle of Delight, Shaumonekuse, and Monchonsia, which were presented to the White House in 1962 by the employees of Sears Roebuck and Company.

The delegation remained in Washington until the end of February; the King portraits evidently were the last order of business. For the return trip the party used commercial transportation; O'Fallon had auctioned away the horses and wagons shortly after the Indians returned from their eastern tour. From Washington the delegates traveled by stagecoach to Wheeling, where the agent bought a flatboat that carried them to Louisville. There they booked steamboat passage—appropriately on the *Calhoun*—to St. Louis, arriving April 5. O'Fallon reported they were "all in fine health and spirits, and most favorably impressed with the strength, wealth, and magnanimity of our Nation"—an impression enforced by the seventeen hundred pounds of presents they brought home.

When the Indians reached their respective villages, they found that they had long since been given up for dead, and their unexpected arrival touched off widespread rejoicing. O'Fallon, however, had little cause for celebrating. The agent had lost a horse and his "most faithful and valuable servant," who had drowned while swimming across the swollen west fork of the Grand River. Furthermore, he claimed to be suffering "worse from fatigue and exposure than I had ever experienced before."

Although the delegation's visit cost the federal government \$6,085, it was considered money well spent, as this editorial from the *Washington Gazette* indicates: "The object of their interesting mission, we believe, has been fully accomplished: these aborigines are deeply impressed with the power of the *long-knives*, that for the future the *tomahawk* will not be raised with their consent, against their white brethren." And the tribes from which the delegates came did remain re-



The Indian in this oil painting by Samuel Morse may be Petalesharro, modeled after the portrait by King (compare inset and page 25).



"THE OLD HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES," CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

markably peaceful as the inexorable tide of white settlement reached the headwaters of the Missouri.

What became of the delegates? Eagle of Delight died of measles within weeks of her return from Washington. The grief-stricken Shaumonekusse vowed to fast to death, but friends forced him to eat, and he lived to become head chief of the Oto. In 1823, upon the death of his brother, Sharitarish became chief of the Grand Pawnee, only to die himself within a year. The Pawnee chief Peskelechaco died in 1826, killed while leading a counterattack against an Osage war party that had raided his village. Petalesharro lived until 1841, becoming one of the most respected and influential leaders of the Pawnee. For most of the delegates, however, the journey to see the Great Father must have been the high point of their lives. Thus, it is fitting that the five portraits now hang in the president's house for all Americans to see and to "reflect on the times that are past." ☞

Herman J. Viola is editor of *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives*, and has performed extensive research on the work of Charles Bird King and the War Department Gallery of Thomas L. McKenney.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

In reproducing these eight portraits by Charles Bird King, *THE AMERICAN WEST* has reconstructed the nucleus War Department gallery that Thomas L. McKenney began in 1822. By 1840 it numbered more than 140 portraits. Although fire destroyed the gallery, King fortunately had made copies of many of the early portraits for his own use. The author, with the aid of a grant from the Penrose Fund of the American Philosophical Society, is trying to locate, identify, and catalog all extant versions, such as those that appear here. The magnificent "Young Omahaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri, and Pawnees," the only known group Indian portrait by King, appears to have been a studio study, perhaps painted after the delegation left Washington. It was not a part of the War Department gallery.

The story of the O'Fallon delegation was gleaned primarily from official records in the custody of the National Archives and Records Service. Most pertinent were the letters relating to Indian affairs received and sent by the secretary of war, Treasury reports, and records of the Office of Indian Trade. The archival sources were supplemented by contemporary newspapers, *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, W. Faux's *Memorable Days in America*, and the three-volume *History of the Indian Tribes of North America* by McKenney and James Hall, which provided biographical sketches of seven of the delegates.

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